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ABSTRACT

In today's higher education arena, a strong emphasis has been placed on institutional accountability and utilization of resources. Considering that individual accountability is an important aspect of institutional leadership and management, higher education has directed little effort to administrative evaluations and climate surveys. The purpose, procedures, and methods for evaluating the performance of administrators or their unit are either in the development stage or inconsistently administered with limited reporting of results or steps for improvement. The success of administrative evaluation efforts depends on identifying the purpose, developing appropriate tools, and providing feedback for improvements. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Resurgence of Administrative Evaluations and Unit Climate Surveys to Improve and Strengthen Institutional Leadership

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Resurgence of Administrative Evaluations and Unit Climate Surveys to Improve and Strengthen Institutional Leadership

Abstract

In today's higher education arena, a strong emphasis has been placed on institutional accountability and utilization of resources. Considering that individual accountability is an important aspect of institutional leadership and management, higher education has directed little effort to administrative evaluations and climate surveys. The purpose, procedures, and methods for evaluating the performance of administrators or their unit are either in the development stage or inconsistently administered with limited reporting of results or steps for improvement. The success of administrative evaluation efforts depends on identifying the purpose, developing appropriate tools, and providing feedback for improvements.

Resurgence of Administrative Evaluations and Unit Climate Surveys to Improve and Strengthen Institutional Leadership

Introduction

At many universities, the focus of evaluations has been on: (1) faculty promotion and tenure systems, (2) student evaluations of teaching, (3) post-tenure reviews, and (4) student outcomes. Little time or effort has been spent on the evaluation of administrative personnel including deans, assistant and associate deans, department chairs, and central administrative personnel. Given their demands and responsibilities and the critical nature of being effective leaders, the issue of administrative evaluation should have played an equally central part in the development of evaluation systems.

Over the past several years, an increased interest in administrative evaluations has been stimulated from the external and internal demands for accountability at all levels of higher education. This demand has also been fueled by three additional factors: (1) the contention by faculty members that their evaluation must be matched by evaluation of administrators, (2) the growing need to protect personnel decisions from legal challenges under anti-discrimination as well as other laws, and (3) the acceptance by more colleges and universities of management principles that place high score on evaluation of performance, goal setting, and periodic feedback (Seldin, 1988 p. 22-23). Essentially, the best rationale for performance evaluation of administrators is that it reinforces positive behavior, identifies need for improvement, and encourages staff development.

The work performance of faculty members and staff and the unit's effectiveness and climate are a direct reflection of the leadership provided by the administrator. Developing a process and means to measure a unit's climate and satisfaction with the work environment can assist in improving not only the performance of the administrator, but also the unit.

Purpose

Any evaluation system needs to be based on a clear understanding of the purpose(s) of the evaluation. Seldin (1988) offers, "The core purpose of administrative evaluations is to locate areas of needed or desired improvement and to point the way to personal and professional development, which in turn enhances the institution's performance (p. 9)." He also states that administrative evaluations should be positive and identify areas needing improvement. Essentially, the purpose should clearly communicate and support methods to assist in the person's development (Bracken 2001). All parties must also have a clear concept of how the results of the evaluations are to be used. Overall, the purpose of the evaluation drives the process.

Once the purposes have been established, the decision regarding who will provide the evaluation information is equally important to the process. The most common source of the performance evaluation has been the direct supervisor. However, more recent efforts have included other individuals and/or groups who frequently interact with the individual, are able to judge the individual's job performance, and whose opinions are valued by the individual (Mont, Judge, Scullen, Systema, Hezlettt, 1998). These individuals bring unique perspectives to the process. Supervisors see the end process, peers see the individual in an administrative context, subordinates (faculty or staff) see the person in a day-to-day context, and clients (outside constituents) see the person in a specific performance context. Each perspective provides a piece of the puzzle, which, when fitted together, shows the whole picture of the person's performance.

Infrastructure for Administrative Evaluation and Feedback

Effective evaluations occur by knowing the following: (1) who is being evaluated; (2) who will provide the evaluations (e.g., faculty); (3) the questions to be asked; (4) the reason for the evaluation; (5) the evaluation process; and (6) who gets the evaluation results. These steps

are critical and must be directly related to the purpose. As was noted above, without a clear purpose, the process has no direction resulting in an inadequate evaluation of an individual. In addition, care must be taken in the design of the appraisal procedures to be suited to the administrative style of the individual and mission of the unit or department (Lahti, 1978).

The endorsement and support of the top administrators for the administrative evaluation process and willingness to provide thoughtful responses from faculty, staff, and other participants are as critical to the success of this process as is the purpose. Support at this level must be articulated publicly with regards to the predominant purpose of improving administrative performance and to provide confidence in the system. Many universities occupy themselves with the niceties of administration evaluation procedures and make virtually no effort to garner active support from the campus community. Individuals who do not endorse the system are unlikely to spend the time and effort to respond thoughtfully and meaningfully. At the same time, administrators are less likely to respond with enthusiasm to the performance feedback when they perceive their evaluations as less than fair or accurate. (Ilgen and Barnes-Farrell, 1984).

At this university, the endorsement is quite evident with the dean's evaluation process outlined in Section C157 of the University Handbook and the department head's process and guidelines included in the Department Head/Chair's manual. Also, many of the top administrators have recently initiated 5-year reviews of their directors within their units.

Unlike many other reviews and evaluations that can be more decentralized, administrative evaluations need to be developed and administered through a central university office. For those institutions without a survey or evaluation office, the institutional research or planning office has often been designated to assist in the development and administration of administrative evaluations. Any office undertaking an administrative evaluation process must

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have a record of integrity and a history of practicing confidentiality. Experience in survey design and assessment methods and procedures are also important.

While individualized evaluation tools could be developed for each academic department or unit, department chairs and deans have similar responsibilities in most cases. The differences among and between administrative units are more likely to require some modifications in evaluation instruments and procedures. An established evaluation form (preferably scanable) could be developed and used for specific groups with the capability to add questions that are specific to the unit or individual. For this university, there are several major specific administrative evaluations used: department head, dean (assistant and associate deans), and other unit heads (directors). These administrative evaluations will be discussed in more detailed in the following sections.

Depending upon the policies regulating administrative evaluations (if any), the individual may request to have an evaluation administered or the evaluation may be mandated for a comprehensive evaluation for the administrative term. Given the purpose, the results might be distributed only to the individual, to the individual and his/her dean (or vice president, provost, immediate supervisor), or to a committee reporting to the supervisor. Even with pre-existing evaluation forms, the entire process may take from three to eight weeks before the individual or group receives the final evaluation results. Recommendations for improvement and program development are often included as part of the report prepared by the office responsible for the evaluations. Again, the purpose drives who will receive the results and the results determine if improvements are needed.

Department Head Evaluations

Today's academic administrator is expected to know how to handle budgetary and fiscal matters and to be able to deal with government agencies and public relations. The administrator

must have good managerial and human relations skills, be able to develop organizational strategies, and conduct budget analysis (Austin and Gamson, 1983). The norm for department heads/chairs is no longer to be passive or have a laissez-faire management style. Therefore, the performance appraisal tool must include questions or statements that reflect the increased expectations of the department head/chair.

The benefits of the faculty members' role in administrative evaluations outweigh any perceived disadvantages. Faculty members feel that, if students can evaluate their teaching performance, then faculty members should be given the opportunity to evaluate the performance of their academic administrator. In a sense, there is a parallel relationship between student evaluation of faculty and faculty evaluation of administrators.

This relationship can be clarified by considering the similarities of purpose between student rating of instruction and faculty rating of administration. There are four purposes of student rating of instruction: (1) to help students select courses, (2) to provide data for personnel decisions, (3) to diagnose instructional strengths and weaknesses, and (4) to create a database for research on the instructional process. If the terms for instruction are replaced with administration, then all purposes except one (to help students select courses) would be appropriate reasons for faculty to evaluate administrators (Farmer, 1978). If the evaluations are used for reappointments, even this purpose is met.

Often faculty members evaluate their respective academic administrator in order to provide feedback on the person's performance and whether or not to reappoint the person to this position for another term (often after 3 to 5 years). Many institutions request feedback from the faculty on department head/chair's performance but it may be in the form of personal interviews or a general questionnaire. Whatever process is used to gather meaningful information for decision-making, this process must be conducted with the utmost confidentiality.

Currently, this university uses two different evaluations forms that provide feedback from the faculty members to the department head/chair. The first evaluation form called the Faculty Ratings of Department Chairperson/Head (FRDC) assists department heads in finding ways to improve their own individual effectiveness. The other evaluation form is the Department Climate Survey (DCS) and it aids in assessing the departmental climate.

Generally, each fall semester, the Central Office sends a request to each department head/chair about scheduling an evaluation by his/her departmental faculty. By responding to this request, indicating which semester he/she wants to be evaluated, and selecting the evaluation form to be used begins the process. The department head/chair has an opportunity to exclude, add, or refine the questions as long as these changes do not change the overall purpose of the question or statement. The Central Office assists with writing the participation letter, administering the survey, compiling the results and preparing the results in a meaningful format for the Department Chair. All results and verbatim comments are provided to the Department Head and may be provided to the Deans if, and only if, there is written permission by the Department chair/head.

Because this university is a Land Grant University, the department heads and directors in colleges with an Agricultural Experiment Station and/or Cooperative Extension components would have a larger and more diverse group of respondents. Therefore, several different evaluations specifically designed for each group may be used for the evaluation process. Usually a review committee is selected and the Central Office works with this committee to administer the survey, compile the results and provide the results to the committee. This committee would make recommendations to the Dean based upon the results.

Dean Evaluation

Essentially, the Dean works with and for the faculty. The Deans speak for the faculty inside and outside the institution; and the faculty generally sees them as supporters and encouragers. At the same time, deans must act in the following capacities: (1) evaluator, (2) gadfly, prodding faculty to do research, write, and publish, stimulating change, and trying to reduce parochialism, (3) mediator, and (4) conservator, maintaining the primary thrust of the institution, but resisting the fads and hasty innovations (Rasmussen, 1978).

At this university, deans are evaluated every 5 years after the first appointment. As was stated above, this process and concept is supported and accepted by the top administrators at the University. Because the evaluation of the Dean is viewed as a serious and necessary process, there are many steps that must be followed.

The Dean provides the Provost a description of his/her overarching expectations, goals, and objectives. The goals are distributed with the evaluation form to each of the respondents to assist them in completing the evaluation of the Dean. The Provost also identifies five references, external to the college, who are knowledgeable of the Dean's work in fund raising and alumni and constituent relations. The references are contacted directly by the Provost and asked to provide a written summary of the Dean's performance. Some of these references will be in higher education, others may be in related professional disciplines and some are from external groups.

The Provost identifies and appoints an advisory committee. The director of the Central Office overseeing the administration of the evaluation summarizes the evaluation results and includes a transcription of the written verbatim comments. Allegations of an unsubstantiated nature will not be included in the material forwarded to the advisory committee, but will be

subject to inquiry by the Provost at his/her discretion. Prior to being finalized, the Provost reviews all written comments.

Each advisory committee member will receive a copy of the final composite of the survey results, a copy of each letter of reference, the summary of the over-arching expectations of the university administration under which the Dean has been operating, the statement of the goals and objectives prepared for the evaluation. The Dean also receives a copy of the survey composite. Prior to the committee drafting its final report to the Provost, the Dean has an opportunity to respond in writing to clarify misconceptions and provide further relevant information. The advisory committee writes a report for the Provost summarizing strengths, weaknesses, issues of substance needing to be addressed and an overall recommendation for appointment or non-reappointment (must receive under most conditions at least a majority vote of confidence to be maintained as the Dean of the College). A draft copy of this report is provided to the Dean. The Dean can, if he or she desires, respond to the committee in writing concerning the draft report. After due consideration of any responses from the Dean, the committee will produce a final copy of the report for the Provost and will forward any response from the Dean to the Provost.

Deans may also take the opportunity for a mid-5-year review. The intent of this feedback is to reinforce positive endeavors of the college and/or dean, to help clarify the mission and direction of the college, to help clarify the college's role in the university and the relationships with external support or professional organizations, to help identify areas where the Dean may want to focus more attention, and to assist the Dean in self-assessment.

Directors and Other Administrators

Because of the diversity of responsibilities, size of offices, relationships between offices, and the proposed number of surveys to be administered, evaluations for directors and other

administers have not been centralized or systematically administered. At this University, some administrative areas have been active in evaluating their respective Associates, Directors, and Assistants. However, in most cases, the evaluation is administered through the respective office and lacks the confidentiality, validity of the questions, and consistency of the form. Recently, a web-type survey has been developed and administered for an Assistant Dean/Director's evaluation. This process proved to be manageable, accepting by most respondents (80% response rate), results were easily compiled and returned in a timely manner.

Unit Satisfaction or Climate Survey

In parallel with the administrative evaluation, unit satisfaction or climate surveys can be collected. Most surveys focus on questions about the supervision of the employee, fairness and equity issues, management or policy issues for the unit, and physical and working conditions. Like an administrative evaluation, the climate survey provides positive feedback as well as identifying areas that might need improvement. Even when the survey is not directly related to the performance of the unit manager, improvements must be made if problems are identified. Asking for feedback and not heeding the input creates serious problems.

Summary

One clear and present part of evaluations is that most people do not want to be evaluated and do not like to provide evaluations. For many administrators, evaluating their faculty and or staff is the most odious task they have. However, a formal and systematic evaluation process aimed at self-improvement provides a credible mechanism for strengthening administrative skills (Munitz, 1977)

Essentially, the administrative evaluation process begins with a clearly defined purpose and the acceptance of the campus community. It is imperative that the campus culture and environment accept the concept of administrative evaluations as a means to improve

administrative performance, detect any problems in the departmental climate, or use as a good decision making tool.

A central administrative unit needs to be designated as the office to administer, monitor, and compile the results. This office should have a proven record for integrity and confidentiality. In addition, an efficient evaluation process with an agreed upon timeline will assist in ensuring accuracy, support, and provide the results to the appropriate people in a timely manner.

As with all processes and working with several groups, good communication is a vital means for survival. Once there is a void in communication, a domino effect occurs which erodes the integrity of the central office administrating the evaluation and the purpose behind the evaluation process.

Maintaining confidentiality is most important. As it is with communication, once this is severed, it is very difficult to regain the trust and confidence of the campus faculty and staff.

To meet the expectations of clientele and staff and to provide for institutional accountability, administration of performance evaluations and unit satisfaction surveys are strongly recommended. Therefore, if the evaluation process has a clear purpose, endorsements from top down, efficient processes, and confidentiality is maintained, administrative evaluations can be seamless and become a part of the university's culture.

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